THE *KAVAL* SYSTEM IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

Technical Report of the Thesis submitted to
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University for the
Award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History

S. RAVICHANDRAN

Department of History
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University
Tirunelveli

THE *KAVAL* SYSTEM IN COLONIAL TAMIL NADU

TECHNICAL REPORT

Kaval system was the indigenous system of policing crime in Tamilnadu. Extant literature on this subject indicates that this system has a long history going back to the ancient period. In the studies undertaken by eminent Indian and Western scholars, pertaining to ancient and medieval periods of Tamilnadu valuable information is available regarding *Kaval* system of the period concerned. In some works related to the modern history of Tamilnadu also there are ample references available on *Kaval* system. However there is no full-fledged study that is exclusively focused on this subject. This thesis, based on extensive use of the colonial archive, attempts such a study.

David Arnold in his, “Dacoity and Rural Crime in Madras 1860-1940” (1979) had made an in-depth study of different crimes in Madras Presidency and classified them into four major categories.

a) Professional Crime
b) Crimes caused by famine
c) Crimes related to *Kaval* system
d) Dacoity as the prelude to insurrection.

Though David Arnold approached the *Kaval* system from the dimension of crime, as it was one among the four categories he has covered, it does not receive his entire critical attention and treatment. Moreover within the period of the colonial Tamilnadu his coverage is from 1859-1940 which is somewhat limited. Besides, his conclusions provide space for further probing.

The period I have covered in this research work is between 1801 and 1947 A.D. The year 1801 is an important turning point in the modern history of Tamilnadu because in that year the entire Carnatic region came under the rule of the British East India Company. Further, in 1802, the *Palayakarar* system and the *Desa Kaval* or *Men Kaval* system were abolished by the Company. 1947 is the year of Indian Independence. The geographical area covered in this study is the present-day Tamilnadu.

Historical Background

Kaval system was an ancient and indigenous system of policing in Tamilnadu. The functionaries of this system were known as the *Kavalkarars.* A major section of them were from the martial communities such as Maravars, Kallars, Naickers and Padayachis. There were *Kavalkagars* from Parayar, Kuravar and Valayar communities too, but relatively speaking, they constituted a tiny section. The office of the *Kavalkarar* was a hereditary one. The most important duty of the *Kavalkarar* was to protect the inhabitants and their properties, their crops, livestock, protecting the travellers, watching the movement of the strangers and guarding the temples within his jurisdiction. In return to their services the *Kavalkarars* were paid by the inhabitants in the form of land grant or a share in the produce during harvest or in money or a combination of the above three.

*Kaval*ship, in addition to being a source of income, was a symbol of power, social status and prestige. As the custodians of the people and their belongings, *Kavalkarars* were highly influential and commanded both respect and fear in traditional society. During times of political crises when the apex bodies of political power became weak these *Kavalkarars* often exercised power like independent rulers in their area of control. On the basis of the available source materials it could be ascertained that right from the ancient period this *Kaval* system successfully survived through the ages in some form or

other with different nomenclatures and regional variations up to the first few decades of the twentieth century.

The immediate pre-colonial political power structure of Tamilnadu presented a picture of a three-tier system. At the top were the rulers of kingdoms of Tamilnadu followed by the *Palayakarars* in the middle order and the *Kavalkarars* at the tertiary level, as minor partners. With the arrival of the British East India Company on the political scenario of Tamilnadu as a contender for political power, the traditional power and influence enjoyed by the *Kavalkarars* came under threat. In the ensuing conflicts some of the *Kavalkarars* fought against the Company individually while some others made common cause with the *Palayakarars* in their wars against the Company. The policies adopted by the Company against the *Kavalkarars* in the days to come were governed and conditioned by these early conflicts. So in the pre-colonial politics of Tamilnadu the *Kavalkarars* were a power to reckon with, and the *Kaval* system was an integral part of the society both urban or rural.

With the establishment of British paramountcy over Tamilnadu, the colonial state, particularly during the phase of its consolidation, attempted to replace the indigenous administrative institutions including the *Kaval* system by importing models from the west. The *Kaval* system was seen to be anachronistic and a vestige of medieval times and therefore stern measures were undertaken by the colonial state to eradicate the *Kaval* system. In 1802, as a first step in this direction, the *Desa Kaval* or the *Men Kaval* (country watch) systems was abolished and by 1816 *Kudi Kaval* (village watch) too was abolished by the colonial state. However this move of the Company was strongly protested and resisted by the *Kavalkarars* with determination. Thus a prolonged struggle commenced between the colonial state and the *Kavalkarars* which continued up to 1947. During the course of the struggle a modern police system was introduced in

1859, in the context of the many changes ushered in the socio-economic front because of the process of modernization initiated by British rule. The *Kavalkarars,* who lost their traditional occupation of *Kaval,* could not accommodate themselves with the changing socio-economic conditions which necessitated occupational changes. Consequently they gradually drifted to the world of crime and preyed over the people. The new police establishment introduced by the colonial state met with complete failure in managing the crimes related to *Kaval.* Having lost their hope with the modern police in guarding them against the increasing illegal exactions of the *Kavalkarars* the people at large on their own accord organized a few anti-*Kaval* movements which yielded some fruit but not to the level expected. As a last resort, the colonial Government of Madras armed itself with the infamous Criminal Tribes Act in 1917 against the *Kavalkarars* and the communities they belonged to. However, in the twilight of the Raj, it was the colonial state which was displaced rather than the *Kaval* system.

Aims of the Study

Kaval system was an ancient system of policing in Tamilnadu and the *Kavalkarars* were the functionaries of the *Kaval* system. In the modern history of Tamilnadu the *Kaval* system and the *Kavalkarars* is an interesting and vital area of historical investigation and has continued to remain largely unexplored. As share-holders of political power at the tertiary level, the *Kavalkarars* played a major role in the socio-economic and political spheres of Tamilnadu. They also made common cause with other anti-colonial forces, during their struggle against the colonial state. Hence this study aims at tracing the history of *Kaval* system in the colonial period and tries to locate the place of the *Kavalkarars* in the colonial history of Tamilnadu.

This study also aims at analyzing the prolonged struggle for power between the colonial state, and the *Kavalkarars* at the local level in the pre-colonial political environment of Tamilnadu. It traces the efforts taken by the colonial state to eradicate *Kaval* system through enacting Regulations and Acts, and by establishing modern police administration and the consequent response of the *Kavalkarars* who were driven gradually, over a period of time, towards the world of crime. This study also elucidates the various factors responsible for the failure of the colonial state in suppressing the *Kaval* system including the mindset and psychological underpinnings of the *Kavalkarars*.

Another aspect on which this study concentrates is an examination of the factors responsible for the outbreak of anti-*kaval* movements in Madurai and Tirunelveli districts towards the close of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth century, and its consequences.

Another important aim of this study is to evaluate the circumstances which shaped the enactment of the infamous Criminal Tribes Act in 1871 (CTA); how ideas that originated in England in the minds of scientists and administrators was imported and implemented in north Indian Provinces to start with, the initial reaction of the Madras provincial administrative circles, and how it was ultimately accepted and implemented in Tamilnadu.

In the course of the above analysis this study differs from the views of the social historians who worked already on the area covered by this study.

Relevance of the Study

Much research has already been carried out and works are available dealing with different aspects of the history of Modern Tamilnadu. So far there is no exclusive study

undertaken on the problem of *Kaval* system that is focused on the colonial period of Tamilnadu. The colonial archive for this still remains largely unexplored and various lacuna needs to be filled. By way of filling up the gap and unearthing new facts this study becomes relevant.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis has been organized into seven chapters including the introductory and concluding chapters. These chapters are followed by a bibliography indicating the range of source materials consulted, and appendices.

In the introductory chapter a survey has been attempted of the available secondary works by eminent scholars of both Indian and foreign origin, which have direct or indirect bearing over the central theme of this study. Since this study approaches the problem of *Kaval* from the dimension of crime a brief mapping of major theories and theoretical frameworks employed by scholars in their study on historical crime has been undertaken, and the impact of these new concepts of crime over the policy makers in India is also discussed.

The second chapter is entitled as *"Kaval System".* In this chapter, the history of the *Kaval* system from the ancient period is briefly discussed. Following this the functions of the *Kavalkarars,* their duties and rights, the categories of *Kaval* system and the *Kavalkarars,* are detailed. The traditional rights and powers enjoyed by the *Kavalkarars,* and their position and status in the society are discussed. Further the condition of *Kaval* system during the early stages of the British rule is also described. Moreover, it also deals with a peculiar form of crime perpetrated by the *Kavalkarars* commonly known as *Thuppu Cooli.*

The third chapter *"Confrontation with the Company"* deals in detail about the relationship between the Company and the *Kavalkarars* during the closing decades of the 18th century marked by frequent confrontations and open rebellions of the *Kavalkarars.* It also deals with the different policies adopted by the Company against *Desa Kaval* and *Kudi Kaval* systems.

The fourth chapter is *"The Colonial State and the Kaval System".* For a better understanding of the subject matter, this chapter has been divided into three divisions i.e. from 1802-1815; 1816-1859; 1859-1896 wherein each phase is marked by a specific development. In 1802 the colonial state abolished the *Desa Kaval* and *Men Kaval* system through its Regulation of 1802 and a new police administrative structure with *Daroghas* and *Tanadars* as important police officials was introduced. This system was replaced in 1816 by another system of police operating under the direct control of Collector, at the district level and Village *Munsiff* at the village level. Moreover in 1816 the *Kudi Kaval* system was also abolished. The new police establishment of 1816 continued to operate until 1859 and in that year the modern police system with officials like Superintendent of Police at the district level was introduced; more importantly, police administration was completely separated from revenue administration. The chapter also discusses how the new measures undertaken by the government broke up the traditional occupational structure of the *Kavalkarars* and pushed them into crime. 1896 was a turning point in the history *Kaval* system because it was marked by the beginning of violent anti-*kaval* movement in Madurai district.

The fifth chapter is *"Anti-kaval Movements in Madurai and Tirunelveli Districts".* This chapter examines the different causes for the outbreak of anti-*kaval* movements in the background of changing political and socio-economic scenario effected by the colonial state.

The sixth chapter, *"The Criminal Tribes Act and the Decline of the Kaval System",* discusses the emergence of new concepts regarding crime replacing the earlier notions in a changing socio-economic environment in England and how crime was conceptualized in new terms based on biological and anthropological sciences. It also deals with how the colonial officials in India were influenced by these new notions of crime while implementing the Criminal Tribes Act in north Indian provinces to start with and later on in the Madras Presidency in 1911. In addition, this chapter elaborately deals with the implementation of the Criminal Tribes Act in Madras Presidency particularly in Madurai and Tirunelveli, the communities covered under this act, its success and failures and, finally the decline of the *Kaval* system.

The seventh chapter draws conclusions from the above study.

Source Materials

Source materials related to the topic of this study are available in abundance with Tamilnadu State Archives at Chennai in the forms of consultations, proceedings, reports, correspondence and letters pertaining to different administrative departments—especially Judicial and Public. District Records and Manuals contain much valuable information regarding particular districts. Madurai District Archives at Madurai is a repository of source materials connected with the topic of this study, pertaining especially to anti-*kaval* movement in Madurai district.

Another important source material having much bearing on the central theme of this study and about its early history before 1800, is available in the form of a folk ballad *Sivarama Thalaivar Kummi* i.e. *'Kummi'* on Sivarama Thalaivar, the *Kaval* chief of Thirukkurungudi in Tirunelveli district. It traces the history of its hero Sivarama

Thalaivar, right from the migration of his ancestors from Ramnad to the Tirunelveli region. It was a period of political instability caused by the efforts taken by Nawab of Arcot against the turbulent *Palayakarars* with the help of British East India Company. It narrates the disputes related to *Kaval* rights among the different group of Kondayamkottai Maravars of southern Tirunelveli region and the exploits of its hero against the forces of British East India Company and ends with his death in a *Kaval* dispute.

Right from K.A.N. Sastri's *The Colas* secondary materials in the form of books, periodicals and journals are available in good number. Though their thematic interests were different they throw occasional light on the central theme and other aspects of this study.

Yet another important Secondary study - basically an anthropological study on the Piramalai Kallar community of Madurai district - is an unpublished Ph.D., thesis by Anand Sankar Pandian entitled as "Landscapes of Redemption: Cultivating Heart and Soil in South India" submitted to the University of California, Berkeley, (1999). It was of much help to understand the Piramalai Kallar community and their *Kaval* system.

Beside these works there are some other works written with the objective of providing the history of a particular castes. *Kallar Charitram* (1928) by Venkatasamy Nattar, *Maravar Charitram* (1938) by Asirvatha Udaiyar Thevar and *Muventarkula Thevar Samugha Varalaru* (1976) by Muthu Thevar fall under this category.

Apart from these materials mentioned above during my field study, I met individuals, interviewed them, and collected information from them, pertaining to

this study. Some of them were descendents of former *Kaval* chiefs. They provided me with much information has been used after vigilant filtration.

Signature of Supervisor

Signature of Candidate

S. Ravichandran
Regd. No.0763

A.R. Venkatachalapathy

Dr. A.R. Venkatachalapathy
Professor
Madras Institute of
Development Studies
Adyar, Chennai - 600 020.